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# ERRORS IN THE SEPTUAGINT AND THE VULGATE FROM WHICH ILLUSTRATIONS AND SCULPTURES DERIVED THEIR ORIGIN.

THE prominent position which the book of Psalms, of all books of the Bible, occupied in the Church as the principal source of the daily *officium divinum*, is commensurate with the attention and preference it received in Christian art in the early mediaeval period<sup>1</sup>. The translation of the Psalms into natural signs, the transference of their metaphors and similes into visible pictures, tended to enhance and enrich the store of forms utilized in mediaeval ornamental arts; and in the established series of motives for pictures both in the illustrations of books by the artists in miniature and in the sculptures executed by architects of cathedrals, there are many things which are nothing but the rendering of certain Hebrew expressions in the Psalms. This notion was, for the first time, proved by Adolph Goldschmidt in connexion with the psalter of the Church of St. Godehard in Hildesheim; it bore its name after the Benedictine monastery of St. Albans near London, to which it formerly belonged; and that writer has pointed out how much of the ecclesiastical sculpture of the twelfth century and its symbolism was derived from this source, which had been hitherto disregarded<sup>2</sup>.

But it was not the original Hebrew text of holy writ from which the sculptors received their inspiration. Many a representation which confronts us like a pictorial riddle cannot be explained at all from the original, but can only be understood from Jerome's Latin translation and its prototype, the LXX. Thus misunderstandings and errors of translators became sources of artistic representations, and monstrosities were turned into lasting symbols and allegorical ornamentations, in the same way as in languages wrongly formed words have become media to convey living thoughts.

A remarkable instance of the liturgical application and perpetuation

<sup>1</sup> Cf. F. X. Kraus, *Geschichte der christlichen Kunst*, I, 2, p. 452, n. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Der Albani-Psalter in Hildesheim und seine Bedeutung zur symbolischen Sculptur des xii. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 1895).

of such an error of translation is afforded by the picture of the princes carrying gates, which is more particularly made use of in Byzantine art, and in the celebration of the Ascension in the oriental church<sup>1</sup>. The psalter of St. Albans also contains the illustration of a man, designated as a prince by a golden wreath on his cap, who carries a couple of gates to Christ<sup>2</sup>. If it were not for the translations, who could imagine that this was intended to be an illustration of Ps. xxiv. 7? The psalmist, in giving poetical life to dead matter, bids the gates to lift their heads in order that the king of glory might make his entry with head erect. The lintels of the gates were, in Jewish antiquity, evidently movable so that they could be raised. In consequence of an error in the text of the Septuagint, or by the carelessness of the translator, the splendid verse was transmitted into the art and the liturgy of the church in a garbled manner. The gates which raised their heads were turned into heads that raised their gates. Jerome repeated only too faithfully the error of the LXX, as will be seen from a comparison of the texts:—

שאו שערים ראשיכם והנשאו פתחי עולם

ἀρατε πύλας οἱ ἄρχοντες ὑμῶν, καὶ ἐπάρθητε πύλαι αἰώνιοι (Ps. xxiii. 7).

Attollite portas principes vestras.

A second instance of an error perpetuated into history is afforded by the motive, so often met with in ecclesiastical sculpture, representing naked or dressed human figures standing or climbing in the midst of vine branches or other boughs. Goldschmidt<sup>3</sup> found the origin of this ornamentation in an illustration of the St. Albans psalter to Ps. xxvii. 7, elucidating the adjoining text *et refluoruit caro mea*. This renewed flourishing of the flesh, the rescue from death, is in this passage no more than a misrepresentation, or a free rendering of the Greek translation, which was followed by Jerome, for the metaphor is not, in this sense, biblical at all (cf. Isaiah lxvi. 14). The original Hebrew words of Ps. xxviii. 7 יעלו לבי became in the LXX καὶ ἀνέθαλεν ἡ σὰρξ μου, and in the Vulgate *et refluoruit caro mea*.

If Goldschmidt's explanation of another illustration be correct<sup>4</sup> it would reveal a singular misunderstanding on the part of the artist of Ps. cxi. 1 in the Psalter of Amiens, a work of the eleventh century. We see a vine branch with birds at which an archer shoots his arrows from below. There does not seem at first sight to exist any connexion between the illustration and the text. Goldschmidt thinks that the word *volet* sufficed to call forth in the mind of the artist the repre-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. J. J. Tikkanen, *Die Psalter-illustration im Mittelalter*, Helsingfors, 1895, i. 1, pp. 60 and 63.

<sup>2</sup> Goldschmidt, l. c. 95.

<sup>3</sup> *Ib.* 63 sqq.

<sup>4</sup> *Ib.* 60.

sensation of birds as the symbol of the *beatus*, and that he sought to complete the text of the psalm by his archer, in as far as the psalm concludes with the verse *Peccator videbit et irascetur*. The translators are not here at fault, for they render the Hebrew (Ps. cxii. 1) correctly:—

אשרי איש ירא את י' במצותיו חפץ מאד

Μακάριος ἀνὴρ ὁ φοβούμενος τὸν κύριον· ἐν ταῖς ἐντολαῖς αὐτοῦ θελήσεται σφόδρα.

Beatus vir qui timet Dominum; in mandatis eius volet nimis.

Goldschmidt should have pointed out the ludicrous nature of the error of which the artist was a victim.

A notorious instance of peculiar or erroneous translations being perpetuated in the allegorical language of art are the horns of Moses on the tomb of Julius II in San Pietro in Vinculis in Rome. It is usually assumed that Michael Angelo did no more than merely render plastically the translation of the Vulgate of Exod. xxxiv. 35, in which Jerome followed Aquila. Michael Angelo's creative genius might, even without such a text, have given to the powerful and venerable head of the lawgiver the graceful rudimentary horns issuing from under the full locks of hair, in imitation of the ancients, who gave to gods like Jupiter Ammon and Bacchus, and even to heroes like Alexander the Great, horns or horn-like elongations as an ornament of the head<sup>1</sup>. But the fact universally known from the Vulgate must at all events have served as a welcome palliation of the incongruity.

I may also mention one of the most peculiar illustrations of the literal wording of the biblical text, contained in the Chludoff psalter which was brought in 1847 from Athos to Moscow, where it is preserved in the monastery of St. Nicholas, as part of the legacy left by Alexei Ivanovich Chludoff. We see in one of the pictures of this manuscript<sup>2</sup> the heavenly globe hovering, and underneath it stand two men, with heads erect, and with upper jaws like the beaks of birds, which reach the globe, and with tongues of such monstrous length that they touch the ground. The words of Ps. lxxiii are taken here in their literal sense, and are "materialized" into a grotesque caricature. The text and translations are—

שְׁתֵּי בָשָׂרִים פִּיהֶם וְלִשְׁוֹנָם תִּהְיֶה בָּאָרֶץ

ἔθεντο εἰς οὐρανὸν τὸ στόμα αὐτῶν, καὶ ἡ γλῶσσα αὐτῶν διήλθεν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς.

This almost repulsive mutilation of this verse by artistic handling

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Lessing, *Laokoon*, ed. Gosche, iv. 112 b.

<sup>2</sup> Tikkanen, i. p. 30 (Table i. 2).

reminds us of an application of the same text, which is, in spite of its literal conception, both touching and happy. The application was made, no doubt, under peculiar circumstances in mediaeval Jewish history. Maimūni's son Abraham tells us<sup>1</sup> that, at the time when the condemnation of his father's philosophy by the government and the Church resulted in the burning of his philosophical works, in consequence of the machinations of the enemies of that philosophy, the latter's triumph was of short duration. The libellers were soon put upon their trial, and the sentence was that their lying tongues be cut out and thrown before their feet. More than ten people underwent in Montpellier this ghastly punishment, and it was then, as we are told by Hillel of Verona<sup>2</sup>, that the verse of the psalm with its striking illustration of contemporary history, was quoted by all.

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<sup>1</sup> קובץ חסידות הרמב"ם, ed. Lichtenberg, iii. י"ז b. About the epigram based on this verse cf. M. Steinschneider, קובץ על יד, i. 30, No. 60.

<sup>2</sup> Kobez, l. c. י"ג a : הנה שגור בפי כל שור בשמים פיהם ולשונם חחך בארץ : י"ג.